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*Jack Anderson*

## New Curtain Of Secrecy

The Reagan administration is quietly trying to slam down an iron curtain of secrecy upon the operations of the government.

A sweeping executive order has been drafted that will make it far easier for bureaucrats to sweep their embarrassments under the secrecy label.

It has become routine government practice for officials to use their "CONFIDENTIAL," "SECRET" and "TOP SECRET" rubber stamps as a shield against exposure when they're up to something of questionable legality or potential embarrassment politically. The Freedom of Information Act was designed to give the public, as well as individual victims of the bureaucrats' shenanigans, at least a fighting chance to find out what the connivers had done.

The administration's proposed executive order would effectively eviscerate the information act. Far from giving the public the benefit of the doubt, the order demands that documents be classified "if there is a reasonable doubt about the need to classify." No bureaucrat worth his swivel chair could fail to think up a "reasonable doubt" about the need to restrict a document he has prepared—if only for the cachet of importance it lends to his work.

Just how rampant the use of classification stamps has become throughout the government is made clear by the fact that the executive order has been reviewed by no fewer than 35 government agencies in its progress through the bureaucracy. Their comments have been forwarded to the National Security Council, where the order is being whipped into final shape for President Reagan's signature.

The draft order has also been reviewed by my associates Bob Sherman and John Dillon. They found the changes in policy to be subtle but significant. Here are some of the more glaring examples:

- Under the currently operative executive order, signed by President Carter in 1978, intelligence sources and methods were to be protected by classification only if it could be demonstrated that disclosure would damage national security. Under the new order, "information relating to sources and methods is presumed to cause damage to the national security."

- By definition, the new order would exempt virtually all CIA operations from the Freedom of Information Act. That's because the act exempts from public access material classified "under criteria established by an executive order."

While few would argue that many legitimate CIA activities must be kept secret, it takes no great imagination to conjure up a whole new generation of dirty tricks that would be hidden from the public under the cover of the new executive order.

- The current executive order requires that the public's interest be a consideration in decisions to classify information. This provision is deleted from the administration's draft order.

- A whole new horde of bureaucrats would be authorized to classify documents under the new executive order.

- In perhaps the most flagrant attack on FOIA, the draft order allows officials to classify material after it has been requested under the act. In other words, documents that weren't secret can be made so retroactively when a member of the public asks to see them.

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